# Why Is Maximus Confessor Not Yet a Doctor of the Church?

*by Hans Urs von Balthasar*

This article, previously unpublished in German, was originally written in 1977 for the Ukrainian journal *Bohoslovia*. Its founder, Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, asked Balthasar (who had, as is well known, written an important monograph on Maximus) for this contribution, with the intention of promoting the elevation of Maximus the Confessor to the rank of Doctor of the Church.

In the Eastern Catholic Church, Maximus Confessor (580–662) occupies a position very similar to that of Augustine in the West. He constitutes a crowning synthesis of earlier theological and spiritual endeavours, one of singular power, and far surpasses in fullness and breadth of vision the elements he brings together. Without his unifying force, Eastern theology would likely have fragmented definitively into individual currents fighting or ignoring one another — which, given the speculatively probing character of Greek thought, where razor-sharp yet essential nuances were at stake, would have been far more consequential and devastating than the comparatively massive heresies that Augustine had to confront in the West: Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism. These were overcome one after another by the superior elevation of Augustine, though with mounting difficulty and effort: Manichaeism relatively easily, since evil cannot be an equally eternal counter-principle against God; Donatism with greater intellectual effort, because the idea that only the priest can transmit the Holy Spirit whom he himself possesses had a partial justification and was as such anchored in the orthodox tradition; Pelagianism most laboriously of all, because the aged Augustine, despite his deep conviction that everything ultimately depends on divine grace, no longer had the strength to leave sufficient open space for the mystery of grace's interplay with human freedom, so that the great Western heresies — the doctrine of double predestination, from the Middle Ages through to the Reformation and Jansenism — were able to fasten upon his last, in part one-sided, formulations.

Nothing of the sort followed upon the superior synthesis that Maximus erected as the crowning conclusion of Eastern patristic speculation, into which he was able — with a sense of balance and equilibrium that borders on the incomprehensible — to bring the most opposed currents of the tradition. Not only this; he achieved still more: the most gifted of his predecessors, the only one who had constructed a truly superior synthesis before him, Origen, had at the same time been the most influential and the most dangerous theologian, remaining so into the sixth century. Everywhere — in theology (in the Cappadocians, for instance) and especially in spirituality, asceticism, and mysticism (most radically in Evagrius Ponticus and his immense sphere of influence) — his simultaneously fruitful and devastating influence was perceptible: he had harboured the ambition of overcoming ancient Greek and Gnostic thought through bold assimilation, and with a Catholic heart and a brain that had in part remained pagan, he had devised a system in which the diversity of worldly things arose from the free

fall of intelligences created from eternity, Christ as the sole human being who remained faithful to the Logos descending to the various levels of alienation in the world and leading all things back — even the demons — into the primordial light. From this, Evagrius and the monasticism that followed him derived an intellectualist asceticism of de-worldification (not far in some respects from the Buddhist), which they successfully carried out. Origen and his monastic following had been condemned under Justinian; his books were burned (perhaps the greatest single loss in the history of the Church), but can mere condemnations truly overcome a great spiritual potency from within?

Maximus did what no other had been able or dared to do: he worked through Origenism down to its first premises, separated the wheat from the chaff, laid bare with the utmost clarity its fundamental defect — the theory of the Fall, which was incompatible with the Christian concept of creation — and incorporated into his theological and spiritual synthesis everything that could be used, above all the magnificent doctrine of the Logos, the Son of the Father, as the archetype of creation, as the innermost ground of the rationality and freedom of finite spirits, as the one who gathers through his Incarnation all the scattered children of God and accomplishes all the great syntheses: between body and spirit, between man and woman, between heaven and earth, God and world... But he also assimilated the dangerously intellectual mysticism of Evagrius, doing so in his *Centuries on Charity* by placing in the stead of a theoretical and essentially individualistic spirituality one of Christian love, thereby giving the spiritual striving of all Christians — and especially of monks — a renewed evangelical foundation. He certainly had predecessors here as well, a (Pseudo-)Macarius and Diadochus of Photike; their insights he did not merely incorporate externally into his synthesis but evidently first appropriated existentially, making his own experience of Christian life the fertile soil from which the spiritual teaching that blossomed in his writings grew. When one considers his critical and simultaneously constructive achievement in the inner overcoming of Origenism, one is put in mind of the words of the Gospel: *'When a strong man, fully armed, guards his palace, his possessions are safe; but when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and distributes his plunder'* (Lk 11:21–22). Maximus distributed the spoils of Origen generously; everything usable he appropriated with concentrated attention (cf. his *Gnostic Centuries*) and thereby deeply enriched his own Christology and Christian spirituality.

But the chief achievement has not yet been named: the clearing of the almost hopeless field of ruins that central Christological speculation presented since the Council of Chalcedon. Chalcedon had — decisively through the intellectual assistance of the holy Pope Leo — brought a tremendous advance in the formulation of the mystery of Christ: two natures, undivided and unmixed, in one Person. But the formulation had, as it were, outrun comprehension. This became clear when the task arose of laying out plainly the inner implications of the words. The parties — the Alexandrians (Cyrillians) and the Antiochenes — remained unreconciled at a deep level, and the departure of the Monophysites

(ultra-Cyrillians) from the orthodox Church at the time of Chalcedon was only an extreme symptom of the discord that continued to smoulder within. One could affirm the conciliar formula and interpret it in the direction of either pre-Chalcedonian extreme. Small steps toward mutual understanding were attempted, but in the sixth century (apart from the heterodox Monophysites) there was no theologian of stature in the Chalcedonian camp. This was all the more fateful because imperial policy was staking everything — even theological patchwork — on reconciling a Christendom breaking apart through the schism: unity formulas were invented, originating from the court and the court-bishops and appearing to have Cyrillian backing, which covertly sought to make concessions to heresy and in fact surrendered the full truth of Christ's Incarnation: two natures, but a single 'energy', a single 'will'...

Here only a superior mind could bring order — even if against all the tendencies of political power. Maximus possessed both: the intellectual equipment to untangle and order the conceptual knot that had been confused for centuries, and the personal courage to expose himself against an overwhelming force and — as Athanasius had done during the Arian upheavals — to carry the cause of orthodoxy almost alone, which brought him not only, like Athanasius, exile, but a martyr's death.

His clarification of Christology brings both dimensions to bear simultaneously: the completeness of Christ's humanity, with its own energy and its own will, and the (Cyrillian) unity of the divine Person who is the bearer of this nature; under no circumstances is the 'Person' (*hypostasis*) of Christ the product of two natures coming together. Nor is Christ's will, like ours, driven about by disordered passions (*gnome*) and compelled to decide for the Father's will only through a hesitating choice between good and evil; his human will is already freely resolved to do the will of God, which is common to the three divine Persons. Maximus proceeds through the Christological concepts with the greatest intellectual clarity and simultaneously with reverent caution, for he is always conscious of pressing up against the divine mystery, for whose impenetrability another great predecessor — the unknown one who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite — had given him the sensibility. His exposition of the Holy Mass (*Mystagogia*) shows clearly how deeply his piety was shaped by Dionysius, how decisively Dionysius determined him to relinquish the direct striving after the experience of God (Evagrius) and to see access to the divine mystery in a surpassing of creaturely possibilities through divine grace (*ekstasis*). That Dionysius, who exercised an immense influence in the Western Middle Ages, also continued to operate in the East and to push back the influence of intellectualist mysticism, is in large measure owing to Maximus.

The Christological struggle — whose external climax was the disputation held in Carthage in 645 with the ex-Patriarch Pyrrhus I of Constantinople — brought, before the tragic conclusion for Maximus, one further important event: the encounter between Maximus and Pope Martin I at the synod convened by the latter in Rome in 649, which spoke out against the imperial Monothelitism and thereby drew upon itself the wrath of Emperor

Constans II. Maximus is not only theologian and mystic but a man of the Church, who regarded the successor of Peter as the head of the Catholic Church and in a decisive hour placed himself visibly at his side for all to see. Both courageous men had to pay for their boldness: the Pope through imprisonment and exile (his successor was elected even while he still lived), Maximus beyond this through mutilation. Lengthy interrogations in prison, whose stenographic records have been preserved, could not bring him to abandon his conviction: theology was for him one with the confession of faith.

The intellectual achievement of the 'Confessor', as he is rightly surnamed, is the undisputed summit of Eastern theology and was never afterwards reached or surpassed. The well-known textbook in which John of Damascus would summarize the principal achievements of patristic theology could never have come about without Maximus, but it does not come close to possessing the inner stature of the latter's far more multi-layered work. Indeed, the synthesis of the 'Confessor' is as powerful as it is open on every side. Some are of the opinion: too open to all stimuli flowing in from wherever they may come. The rivers that empty into his great lake truly come from the most opposing directions. Aristotelian thought unites with Neoplatonic influences (mediated through Dionysius), speculation with mysticism, allegorism with a simple exposition of the Lord's Prayer, personal prayer with liturgical prayer; all directions and schools of spirituality have their place side by side in this great, Catholic heart. And no epoch of patristic theology has not left its imprint: behind Chalcedon stand Cyril and Nicaea, but also the Antiochenes, also the Cappadocians, whom he especially loves and specifically comments upon, also Origen, and also — very clearly — the earliest of the great theologians, Irenaeus, to whom he perhaps stands closest in his fundamental design: the Logos becomes flesh in order to 'recapitulate' all his human images into his archetype (as Irenaeus and Maximus say with St. Paul) and to bring the whole of creation home to the Father.

The catholicity of Maximus is an open catholicity; it does not force the multiplicity of perspectives into a humanly contrived scheme. Yet it brings everything into relation with everything else. He is no compiler, but one who possesses overview and can survey from his point of unity more than others can. And it is precisely in this that he is the one predestined to be a Doctor of the Church.

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